

Long Live Stalin! Putin's Politics of Memory

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Putin's politics of memory, concentrated around the cult of the Great Patriotic War, constitutes a key pillar of the social legitimisation of his authoritarian regime and the engine of his integration project directed towards the post-Soviet countries. However, it also contributes to the rehabilitation of Joseph Stalin, one of the worst criminals in world history. The inability of the Russian elite and society to deal with Stalin's totalitarian legacy and the dark sides of the Great Patriotic War, reveals one of the more serious of Russia's problem, namely the persistent popularity of imperial thinking mixed with messianic nationalism.

World War II was a horrific experience for the nations of the former Soviet Union. Fatalities amounted to at least 20 million people. The Soviet Union's enormous war effort contributed decisively to the defeat of Nazi Germany. It is, therefore, not an accident that the War became the most important part of the national memory for the post-Soviet nations. Their identities centre on the enormous sufferings, martyrdom, heroism and victory. However, the legacy of the War is substantially more complex. What Putin and Russians in general don't want to remember is the totalitarian and imperial nature of the Soviet Union, the alliance between Hitler and Stalin (1939-1941) which created favourable conditions for Nazi Germany's expansion, the inhuman treatment of Soviet soldiers ('cannon fodder') by Stalin, which contributed to their very high death toll and the massive war crimes committed by the Soviets during the War including genocides against small Soviet nations. What is even worse, the legacy of WWII is seriously manipulated by the authoritarian Russian elite (e.g. war against 'fascist' Ukraine) and used as an instrument of political repression. In April 2014 the Russian parliament endorsed a law which penalises activities that attempt 'to spread intentionally false information about the Soviet Union's activities during World War II.' The law prohibits the 'artificial creation' of historical evidence. The use of such *Orwellian Newspeak* confirms that the Russian ruling elite prefers censorship over a scientific research of the difficult past.

The central place of the Great Patriotic War in Russian historical memory hampers a critical evaluation of Stalin because he, as a commander in chief, became the personification of the War. Indeed, the opinions polls conducted regularly by the Levada Centre, a prestigious sociological research institute, show that around 2/3 of Russians subscribe to the opinion that 'regardless of his mistakes and flaws, the most important thing is that under his leadership our people were victorious in the Great Patriotic War.' Only around 15 percent has a different view.

However, the current totally uncritical affirmation of the Great Patriotic War by Putin's regime, combined with its growing authoritarianism, has resulted in Stalin's creeping rehabilitation. The example was set at the top. For instance, in 2017 Putin himself condemned the 'excessive demonisation' of Stalin during famous interviews with Oscar-winning filmmaker Oliver Stone. Putin even said that 'tough' criticism of Stalin amounted to 'attacking the Soviet Union and Russia.' Already in 2013 Putin said that Stalin was no worse than the 'cunning fellow' Oliver Cromwell who has a lot of monuments despite the fact 'he played a very ambiguous role in Britain's history.' In consequence, according to Putin, Stalin deserves statues in his honour just as much as the British lord protector.

Evidence for Stalin's rehabilitation is the assortment of magnets, mugs, T-shirts and other paraphernalia sold by street vendors to tourists in Russian towns. Bookstores across the country sell more volumes than ever before, glorifying Stalin as a bulwark against fascism. During the period around 9 May, the day of victory on Nazi Germany, portraits and posters commemorating Stalin can be found in various public places. More than ten statues of Stalin have gone up all over the country since 2012. This kind of politics of memory inevitably had

to leave an impact on Russian society. In the before mentioned opinion polls conducted by the Levada Centre, in 2007 more than 70 percent of Russians recognised the Great Terror (1937-38) as a political crime which cannot be justified. Meanwhile, in 2017 less than 40 percent subscribed to that opinion. The attitude towards erection of Stalin monuments has also changed in recent years. In 2005 almost 55 percent of Russians was against the construction of new monuments for Stalin and more than 35 percent was in favour. In 2017, the number of Russians rejecting this idea dropped below 40 percent and for the first time since the 1980s the number of Russians thinking differently gained – though only slightly - the upper hand. As far as the evaluation of the general role of Stalin in Russian history is concerned, his image has improved dramatically. In 2008, less than 40 percent assessed his contribution to the history of Russia negatively and their number minimally surpassed the number of people with a positive opinion. Meanwhile, in the opinion poll undertaken in 2016 almost 55 percent of Russians assessed Stalin's role in the history of Russia positively and only 30 percent negatively. Moreover, in 2008, almost 70 percent of respondents recognised Stalin as a cruel tyrant responsible for the death of millions of innocent people. Currently this opinion is only shared by less than 45 percent of Russians. Unfortunately, this increasing leniency towards the totalitarian legacy of Stalinism constitutes the most shocking indication of the growing authoritarianism of Putin's regime.

The rehabilitation of Stalin is strongly correlated with the growth of the neo-imperialistic worldview in Russian society. Stalin is for ordinary Russians a symbol of the greatest mightiness of their country in the history. In fact, the Soviet Union under Stalin reached the status of global super power which Putin's Russia is trying to regain. These aspirations favour the rise of admiration of Russians for Stalin, the Man of Steel, because Putin discourages them from thinking about the terrible price the Soviet Union paid for its superpower status. Meanwhile, as genocide scholar Adam Jones rightly points out 'there is very little in the record of human experience to match the violence unleashed between 1917, when the Bolsheviks took power, and 1953, when Joseph Stalin died.' In 2008, 40 percent of Russians agreed with the opinion that 'Stalin was a wise leader who made the USSR powerful'. In 2018 their number approaches 60 percent.

The affirmation of Stalin and the Great Patriotic War also represents a very good exemplification of the strengthening of Russian nationalism. Soviet social identity is commonly associated with propaganda promoting class consciousness, however as David Brandenberger in his excellent study 'National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956' argues: 'Stalinist ideology was actually more Russian nationalist than it was proletarian internationalist. During the 1930s, Stalin and his entourage rehabilitated famous names from the Russian national past in a propaganda campaign designed to mobilize Soviet society for the coming war.' Legendary heroes like Aleksandr Nevsky, Ivan the Terrible, Peter the Great and epic events like the Battle of Borodino or Poltava quickly eclipsed conventional communist slogans.

This politics of identity and memory reached apogee during the Great Patriotic War. The essence of this politics can be summarised in the famous toast made by Stalin at a Reception in Honour of Red Army Commanders given by the Soviet government in the Kremlin in May 1945 in order to celebrate the unconditional capitulation of Germany.

'I drink in the first place to the health of the Russian people because it is the most outstanding nation of all the nations forming the Soviet Union.

I propose a toast to the health of the Russian people because it has won in this war universal recognition as the leading force of the Soviet Union among all the peoples of our country.'

According to Brandenberger this genre of nationalism foreseeing Russians as a leading and chosen nation is deeply rooted in Russia's history, survived Stalin's death and continues to resonate strongly among Russians today.